Final Exam: Participation Observation Research

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Abstract

Present research was conducted at a small charter school located in Columbus, Ohio that specializes in working with students with disabilities. All of the students who attend this school are on Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Three young students were tutored on content area reading, with a focus on reading comprehension strategies. All three students struggled with both encoding and decoding. Teaching emergent and young readers how to comprehend a text requires multiple strategies and techniques. Although emergent and young readers may not be able to read a text independently, comprehension is still possible through the use of comprehension strategies, scaffolding, and modeling. Emergent readers, young students, and students who are struggling academically need to have these strategies explicitly taught to them.

School Setting

Brookstone is a charter school located in Columbus, Ohio. Brookstone is housed in a local Presbyterian church. Brookstone has approximately 65 students, ages nine to eighteen. Small class size, individualized attention, and a computer- based curriculum differentiate Brookstone from other schools found in central Ohio. Learning takes place in small rooms throughout the church, with about three to four students in a room.

Brookstone uses a computer-based curriculum called A+. Students complete computer modules in different content areas on the A+ program. According to Mr.B, the assistant principal, students begin to attend classes at the fifth grade (Byers, Personal Communication, November 11, 2011). Brookstone offers classes such as Latin and Speech. The maximum number of students in a class is eight. The classes are small at Brookstone in order to provide individual attention and to decrease negative behaviors. Some of the behaviors I have witnessed are running away from teachers, yelling, crying, and hiding from teachers.

Ms. M, my cooperating teacher, is one of the intervention specialists at Brookstone. According to Ms. M, all of the students at Brookstone are on Individualized Education Plans. Many of the students would simply “not fit in” at a typical public school due to poor social skills, perseveration on high interest topics, and low academic achievement.

Brookstone accepts students from all socioeconomic levels. I have observed that many of the students at Brookstone are below grade level both academically and socially. Brookstone provides a place for these students to succeed and prepare for their future.

My Students

I tutored three students who are the youngest students at Brookstone for approximately five weeks on content area reading. I tutored the students twice a week for a total of four hours per week. Robert is nine-year-old boy, Carly is a ten-year-old girl, and Pat is an eleven-year-old boy. This is the first year that they have attended Brookstone. All of my students expressed how much happier they are at Brookstone in comparison to their previous placements. Last year, Robert and Carly attended public elementary schools and Pat was homeschooled. They expressed that they enjoy the small class sizes and ability to work at their own pace on the computer program.

The students I tutored primarily used the A+ computer program for their academics. A paraprofessional supervised their work on a daily basis. Ms. M, the intervention specialist, has little contact with the students. She relied on information from the paraprofessional, other teachers, and tutors. Pat received math tutoring and Robert received reading tutoring on a weekly basis. Carly did not receive any additional support. I was surprised to learn that the students I tutored only attended physical education class, a small reading group, and a class to prepare for the Ohio Achievement Test. The remainder of their work is computer based. According to the assistant principal, the older students at Brookstone attend additional classes such as Speech and Latin. In these classes, the computer is rarely used.

Robert

Robert is below grade level both academically and socially. Robert typically brought small toys to schools, which tended to be a distraction. He struggled with focus, impulse control, and academics. Robert was easily distracted and liked to tell stories during our tutoring sessions that are not directly related to the lesson. Robert became easily frustrated and would either run away, put his head on the table, or hide. Robert had a few tantrums in the classroom; these typically took place shortly after he arrived at school. On one occasion, Robert ran into the parking lot during a tantrum. Robert is also a very loving and caring young boy; he seeks attention from teachers and peers. Each time we worked on something during a tutoring session, he wanted to share his work with his teacher and peers. He was quick to apologize for mistakes, especially related to impulsive behavior. For example, after running away from me, Robert was quick to apologize with minimal prompting.

Carly

Carly enjoys listening to music while she works. She is best friends with Robert, although she did get frustrated when Robert is acted inappropriately. Carly’s academic abilities vary by subject, from third to fifth grade. Carly is very motivated by external rewards such as stickers or food. Carly worked quietly and independently in the classroom. Both of Carly’s brothers also attend Brookstone.

Pat

Pat is below grade level in reading. He struggled with basic phonological awareness. He tended to guess at words, most of the words he could read had been memorized or are related to a high interest topic. Pat is especially interested in science, particularly bearded dragons and the Solar System. Pat was also easily distracted. When we worked in the cafeteria, he looked around the room and would yell out to other students.

The teachers at Brookstone are in the process of assessing the academic abilities of my students, including their reading abilities. One way I determined the reading abilities of my students was by conducting readability tests. Determining the reading abilities of my students helped me decide if the text was appropriate for teaching comprehension strategies. I also observed if my students were able to read grade level books and comprehension worksheets.

I believe it is imperative for my students to learn how to comprehend text before attending classes. The students I tutored are accustomed to reading from the A+ computer program and then answering questions from the reading. One downfall of this method is that the questions on the test use the same wording as the questions from the reading, which limits their opportunities to expand their language skills. I noticed that my students acquired minimal knowledge because they memorized what they read. Comprehension is not memorization; rather it is expanding on prior knowledge and developing new schemata.

Robert, Carly, and Pat also do not have practice with basic reading skills because the computer reads to them. I spoke with Ms. M and one of the reading tutors about how much Carly and Pat relied on the “reader.” In my last two weeks of working with Carly and Pat, the “reader” was taken off of Carly and Pat’s computers. Robert requires the “reader” as he is unable to read a text independently. If Robert read a text independently, he focused on sounding out the words and lost the overall meaning of the text.

My students did not have many opportunities to be actively engaged in the learning process while at Brookstone as the majority of what they learn is from the computer. Ms. M asked that I not work with my students on their A+ computer program. I provided the engagement and hands-on-learning that otherwise would not have occurred.

Robert and Carly are always very excited to work with me. Every time I arrive at Brookstone Carly and Robert hug me and jump up and down. I believe there are two main reasons for this: they got to interact with someone who is caring and provides individual attention and they are engaged in the activities. My students were engaged in the learning process through discussion, shared reading, highlighting, underlining, writing, and drawing. Pat did not like working on reading with me because he lost time to complete his A+ computer assignments. Pat tried to complete his assignments as quickly as possible so he could play games when his assignments were completed. Sometimes, we worked on something that is a high interest topic or earned stickers. After five weeks of working with my students, it appeared that readers who are not motivated to read or listen to someone read to them will struggle with comprehension.

Project Based Learning and Questioning

Ms. M wanted to start incorporating Project Based Learning (PBL) at Brookstone. According to The Buck Institute for Education (2003), Project Based Learning is “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning essential knowledge and life-enhancing skills through an extended, student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks” (The Buck Institute for Education). In PBL, students are actively engaged in the learning process, which aids in overall comprehension of the subject. I can see my students benefiting from PBL because the more variety and hands-on-learning I incorporated, the more they were able to comprehend a text. I agree with Ms. M that PBL should be used with the younger students because they tended to struggle with staying focused (Morbitzer, Personal Communication, December 1, 2011). I also think that these students need to learn how to initiate their own questions about a topic.

Additionally, PBL can be used to address many of the Ohio Department of Education standards and can be incorporated in all content areas. Brookstone has an annual science fair, which is one example of PBL. For example, a student could come up with a hypothesis for a science project (student led inquiry), create a hands-on experiment, and then present their project. Oral presentations are yet another benchmark that can be used to demonstrate comprehension. Project Based Learning combines many comprehension strategies such as active involvement in learning, extension of prior knowledge, and answering higher-level questions.

Emergent Readers

“Tell me and I’ll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I’ll understand.” This Chinese proverb closely aligns with my philosophy of teaching and specifically applies to emergent and young readers. After working with my students, I discovered that they all struggle with both encoding and decoding. So, how do we increase reading comprehension in emergent and young readers? And, better yet, how do we teach emergent and young readers to independently apply these strategies? I tried multiple comprehension strategies with my students and I also discovered that each strategy has its pros and cons (see table 1). I have also discovered that the effectiveness of strategies varies by student (see table 2). Overall, I believe we must show them, use multiple modalities, and interact with them. Involvement is key.

My students have not had the opportunity to experience literacy at home and at an early age. Robert and Carly come from difficult home lives; Carly lives with her grandparents because her mother is unable to care for her and her brothers and Robert’s father in jail. These students have not been exposed to a language-rich environment at home. Ms. M has encouraged many parents to read with their child for at least 15-20 minutes a night, but for most families this has not occurred (Morbitzer, Personal Communication, December 3, 2011). McKenna and Robinson (2009) state, “Children’s introduction to written language begins before they come to school. Parents and other caregivers read to young children, and children observe adults reading” (p. 5). But, what if a child comes to school without this prior knowledge? What can we as teachers do to help these children succeed? I believe we must teach them how to both encode and decode meaning of a text.

All of my students had a basic understanding of the phonemes and graphemes in the English language. But, once they encountered a word they did not know how to read, they simply guessed at how to read the word. Even if children cannot read on their own, comprehension of a text is still possible through use of comprehension strategies.

Comprehension-What can we do about it?

Strategy: Using resources and taking notes for vocabulary acquisition

I used a plethora of strategies to engage my students in learning to comprehend text such as: using resources to access information, taking notes, using graphic organizers and reading guides, shared reading, making connections with the text, and playing learning games. Previously, my students did not have any experience in “learning to comprehend.” One of the most important strategies I taught my students is vocabulary acquisition. I taught my students how to determine the meaning of an unknown word by showing them how to use their resources such as: a thesaurus, glossary, and “fact finder” in their books. I also taught them to decide if they could determine the meaning of a word by reading the surrounding words. The look of amazement on their faces when they realized they could locate the meaning of vocabulary words in a text was priceless. They learned they could independently, or with minimal assistance, determine the meaning of an unknown word.

Vocabulary is a necessary component in comprehension, but knowing how to use resources, such as dictionaries is key. As adults we continue to use these resources in our jobs and education. For example, if I do not know a word that is found in one of my textbooks I look the word up in the glossary or in a dictionary to help me better understand the text. Introducing my students to these resources is yet another step in increasing their independence in comprehension.

Another method of helping students remember vocabulary is to teach students how to take notes. I chose to teach a lesson on note taking because the paraprofessional mentioned she wanted to have the students start taking notes, but she was having trouble getting them to do so. I wrote a brief instructional guide on note taking and had each of the students practice taking notes. I allowed my students to choose the text they wanted to use to practice. Teaching students to take their own notes is one method of helping students independently comprehend text. Note taking is a skill students will need throughout their schooling. I wish someone had taught me at a young age how to take good notes. Although my students needed a great deal of practice with this strategy, introducing this strategy at a young-age will prepare them for the future. After teaching the note-taking lesson, Carly began to take notes without any prompting. Carly tended to write exactly what the text says when she took notes. We worked on paraphrasing, but this is still very difficult for her.

According to Ms. M, using guided notes may be the first step in note taking for emergent readers (Morbitzer, Personal Interview, December 3, 2011). After working with my students, I agree with her suggestion because of the difficulty my students had in taking notes and completing reading guides.

Strategy: Graphic Organizers

Timelines, such as graphic organizers, are another method of helping students comprehend text. Even if a student is unable to read a text independently, with the assistance of a teacher, students are able to construct meaning of a text. I introduced Robert to a variety of graphic organizers while working on the non-fiction project. We used a Venn diagram, semantic map and labeled picture (map). In order to help Robert complete the graphic organizers, I provided a great deal of scaffolding. For example, I provided a word bank for Robert to complete the labeled picture. This seemed to be effective because Robert completed the task with minimal frustration.

First, I read the text to Robert or we took turns reading. Robert and Carly practiced the skill of taking turns reading while reading the book “You Read to Me, I’ll Read to You” by Mary Ann Hoberman. I reminded Robert to track with his finger as I read to help him focus on the text. Staying focused while reading increased his comprehension of the text because he was able to actively follow along. Robert has a difficult time staying focused and teaching Robert to track was very beneficial. Robert needs to be actively engaged in the learning process as much as possible or he will lose interest in the lesson.

I particularly remember working with Pat on a reading about the Solar System. Pat has a very high interest in space and much of what he knows about space comes from watching television shows such as *Myth Busters*. Pat has trouble both accommodating and assimilating knowledge, he believes what he knows about a topic (especially space) is accurate. He debated with me about what the text says and what he believes to be true. Ms. M suggested that one method I could use with Pat was to say, “That is true in the television world, but in the real word this is what is true” (Morbitzer, Personal Communication, December 1, 2011). I think Ms. M’s suggestion of helping Pat accommodate and assimilate knowledge is helpful because it makes a clear distinction between the two-worlds, television and real-life.

One of the strategies I taught Pat was to refer to the text and to graphic organizers in the text for clarification and expansion on prior knowledge. We examined a timeline in the back of his Solar System book. I read the timeline to Pat because he was unable to read the book independently. Although Pat brought the book from home, the book was above his instructional level (McKenna and Robinson, 2009, p. 31). We worked together to read the Solar System book and created our own timeline of the main events that occurred in the history of space exploration. I used a whiteboard to create the timeline; using something other than paper seemed to increase Pat’s attention and therefore comprehension.

I also used the KWL strategy (what you already know, what you want to know, and what you have learned) with Pat. Pat and I worked on completing a KWL on a Scholastic news article. I think he enjoyed the strategy because he had more control over what he wanted to learn.

Ms. M also mentioned that in order to prepare students to take the Ohio Achievement Test, Brookstone teaches their students how to use graphic organizers to organize their thoughts before answering an essay question. According to “Graphic Organizers and Students with Learning Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis,” graphic organizers help make abstract concepts more concrete (Dexter & Hughes, 2011, p.52). Robert had a very difficult time with abstract concepts and I am hoping that some of the graphic organizers I taught him to use, during the non-fiction unit project, will help him when he takes the Ohio Achievement Test.

Strategy: Reading Guides and Questioning

In working with Robert, I found that teaching emergent readers how to complete a reading guide could be a difficult process. But, according to McKenna and Robinson there are many benefits to using a reading guide to increase comprehension. The benefits include helping students focus on key information, making reading active, making students translate text into their own words, and combining reading with writing in one assignment. Reading guides can also be used for review and discussion (McKenna and Robinson, 2009, p.118).

In my experience, students who are unable to read the text independently will need to work individually with a tutor to decrease frustration and increase comprehension. After examining the different types of reading guides in McKenna and Robinson, I decided to use a non-hierarchical guide with Robert. A non-hierarchical guide was appropriate for Robert because he could follow along with the text as I read. A hierarchical guide would have been too challenging for Robert, as he became somewhat frustrated while completing the non-hierarchical reading guide. His frustration level increased when he had to answer critical and inferential questions. Next time, I would use more literal questions and less critical and inferential questions. The article “High 5!" Strategies to Enhance Comprehension of Expository Text” uses more child-friendly wording to describe the three question types: a right there question (literal), a think and search question (critical) and a beyond the text question (inferential) (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010, p.167-168). In the future, I would label the questions using this child-friendly language.

Strategy: Read Alouds and Shared Reading

Read Alouds is a method used with young readers, even beginning at the preschool level. Read Alouds can also be used with emergent readers and readers who are below grade level. The article, “Building Preschool Children’s Language and Literacy One Storybook at a Time” emphasizes the importance of Read Alouds or Shared Reading. “Shared storybook reading is a broad term, including all instances when an adult reads to a child or children, pausing to engage children in discussion about the text” (Beauchat & Blamey, 2009, p.27). Ms. M recommended a few different types of books that were ideal for Read Alouds because the books were leveled and the students found them to be entertaining. Ms. M recommended several series, *Bad Kitty*, *Captain Underpants*, *and Diary of a Whimpy Kid* (Morbitzer, Personal Communication, December 3, 2011).

I read most of the texts to Pat and Robert because when they read they were concentrating on how to decode each word and this lead to an inability to com-prehend what they had read. Read Alouds can increase oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, phonological awareness, and print awareness (Beauchat & Blamey, 2009 p.27).

Strategy: High 5!

I used the “High 5!” strategy from the article “High 5!” Strategies to Enhance Comprehension of Expository Text” with each of my students. The “High 5!” strategy is a combination of comprehension strategies. I plan on using this strategy in my own classroom because it is so comprehensive. The strategy includes five parts: activating background knowledge, questioning, analyzing text structure, creating mental images, and summarizing (Dexter & Hughes, 2011, p.166-176). The article includes a bookmark that can be used to help students remember these steps, but I created an instructional guide with these steps to assist my students. We used the “High 5!” strategy before, during, and after reading the article *The Long Giraffe* by Guy Belleranti. Before we read the text, I had a brief discussion with each student about the five comprehension strategies. Next, I worked with Carly on activating background knowledge. I asked Carly and Robert to tell me everything they knew about giraffes. Carly said, “I know they have long tongues, can run very fast with their long legs, and they have long legs so they can get high leaves from the trees.” Robert said, “I know giraffes have tall necks, can eat leaves on trees, and can be little or tall.” Robert thought some giraffes were small because he was looking at a picture of a mother with her calf. Next, I had both Carly and Robert come up with questions they had about giraffes before reading the article. This was very easy for Carly, but Robert needed a great deal of prompting. As we read, I also asked both students questions about giraffes. Robert was unable to answer my questions due to a lack of focus. After answering questions before and during reading, we analyzed text structure. Robert and I discussed that the article was written in paragraphs, not in a list. We discussed that when his mom went to the grocery store she made a list and that the article did not look like his mom’s grocery list. I gave Carly three choices to analyze text structure: “Is it a list?” “Is it a descriptive paragraph?” “Is it a poem?” Carly was able to accurately answer that the article was written in paragraph form. She pointed to each paragraph; Carly’s high interest in animals may have helped her remain focused on the topic. Lastly, we created mental images of what a giraffe looked like. Both students struggled with this aspect. I called this step, “making pictures in our head.” I had a difficult time helping my students create mental images of the text. In the future, I plan to have my students draw a picture about what they read (Morbitzer, Personal Communication, December 3, 2011).

Strategy: Making Connections and using Multiple Modalities

I worked with my students to make three types of connections: connecting text to prior knowledge, connecting text to prior experiences, and connecting text to other text, pictures, or videos. I worked with Robert on making connections during the non-fiction unit project on Australia. Robert was able to make connections with what he already knew about Australia (from his A+ program and during a “picture walk”) and then from watching a video on Australia. I specifically chose the video on Australia because the narrator of the video was a nine-year-old boy, like Robert. Robert and I were able to discuss the video and how he was like the boy in the video and how he was different. In my experience, helping students determine similarities and differences is an important cognitive strategy. Robert seemed to really enjoy making connections between the pictures and the video. He said, “Hey, didn’t we just see those people with face paint (Aborigines) in the book?” He appeared to be proud of himself for seeing the similarities in both the pictures and the video. Later, we were able to expand on these pre-reading connections as we read (during reading) and after we read. Using multiple modalities such as examining pictures and watching videos helped Robert better connect and find interest in the text. Robert was also able to make connections with the reading on giraffes. For example, after we read the article, Robert made a connection between giraffes and his dog. We read that giraffes drink ten gallons of water a day. Robert said, “Whoa, my dog drinks one gallon of water a day!”

Strategy: Making learning fun

The last strategy that I found to be particularly helpful in increasing comprehension was playing games. Robert and I played a matching game, similar to “Go Fish” on Australia. Robert loved the game and this reinforced his knowledge of the material. After playing the game, Robert was able to answer more questions about Australia. The game included all levels of questions, but the inferential and critical questions were questions he had previously seen in the reading guide. I chose to use these same questions because of Robert’s difficulty with comprehension of abstract concepts.

Ms. M also recommended a reading program called “TumbleBooks,” which are entertaining animated books that help hold student attention. After reading a “TumbleBook,” students take quizzes on the book. “The TumbleBook Library provides enrichment to students who are reading independently with a variety of high interest material. It also provides support to students who require skill building with a variety of exercises that can be matched with other areas of the curriculum” (About the TumbleBook Library). I plan on further researching “TumbleBooks” because they appear to combine many of the comprehension strategies I have found to be helpful with my students including; using high interest material, differentiating instruction for readers of all levels, and reading to students if necessary.

Where can I go from here: What I learned

So, how can we help emergent readers learn to comprehend text and increase their independence in comprehension? I have found the most effective way to increase comprehension is to use multiple strategies. Multiple strategies also helped keep the students engaged because they did not become bored. Using multiple strategies helped me determine which strategies were most effective for each student.

“Skilled readers use different strategies to comprehend expository text, and teachers play a critical role in the acquisition of effective strategies. Strategies should be explicitly taught over a long period of time; we should not assume that all students will learn them in an incidental or serendipitous way” (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010, p.166). The article, “High 5!” Strategies to Enhance Comprehension of Expository Text” perfectly describes everything I have learned about reading comprehension while tutoring. Ms. M also agrees that strategies should be taught one at a time in order to not overwhelm the students. In the future, I will remember this advice and spend more time on one strategy instead of trying to teach multiple strategies in a short amount of time.

I also learned that in order for comprehension to occur for emergent or young readers scaffolding and differentiation is important. Scaffolding can be provided by reading a text to the student, having a student dictate their answers, providing additional wait time, time for discussion, and modeling all strategies. Also, through trial and error, I am beginning to determine what types of reading guides are appropriate. I would still like to learn more about this topic, and hopefully through additional field experiences I will be able to reach this goal. In relation to reading guides, the types of questions used is also important to consider to ensure the questions are at the students’ instructional level and within their zone of proximal development.

Future Planning: Implementing what I have learned

Throughout this course and tutoring students at Brookstone, I learned a great deal about comprehension of content area texts, but, I still have so much more I want to learn about reading comprehension. For example: how can I determine if a child has comprehended a text? How can I correct incorrect knowledge without hurting a student’s feelings? What are some other fun ways to teach and incorporate reading comprehension into content area classes? How can I objectively assess reading comprehension? How can I increase parent involvement in creating a print-rich environment at home? I hope through my field experiences, speaking with practicing teachers, student teaching, and when I have my own classroom I will be able to further develop my skills in this area.

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